

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

Setting the Record Straight on *Tafwīd*¹

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What is the meaning of this non-committal [*tafwīd*] that we are discussing?

Some brothers here are arguing with us on the basis that the meaning of non-committal [*tafwīd*] is that the wordings [*alfāz*] of these attributes have incomprehensible meanings and that nothing can be understood from them whatsoever, and that they are akin to the letters *Kāf Hā ‘Ayn Yā Šād, Ḥā Mīm*², and so on. So in response to that I say: O Allah! I declare before You my innocence and disavowal of these words! This position was shunned by the Imāms.

Some people say that the meaning of the non-committal [*tafwīd*] to which we adhere is that these attributes have meanings, however their meanings are beyond the scope of the Arabic language and none know them except Allah, the Exalted. O Allah! I declare before you my innocence and disavowal of these words!

Some people argue with us on the position of hesitation [*tawaqquf*]³—and this is another position that is all together different from non-committal [*tafwīd*]. In brief, this position states that these expressions are not applied to attributes or other than attributes. Now to detail the falsehood of these positions will take too long and there’s no need for it because it is not the subject of our discussion; I merely wanted others to understand us.

¹ *Tafwīd*: to entrust the meanings of the ambiguous verses [*al-mutashābihāt*] to Allah and take a position of non-committal. Imām Badr al-Dīn b. Jamā’a said: “The Salaf and the people of figurative interpretation both agreed that things that do not befit the Majesty of the Lord, Exalted is He,...are not intended...They differed regarding the specification of what possible meanings befit His Majesty. The Salaf remained silent without specifying what was meant, and the people of figurative interpretation interpreted it.” (*Īdāh al-Dalīl fī Qaṭi’ Ḥujaj Ahl al-Ta’īl*: p.103)

² From the disjoined letters in the Qur’ān [*al-ḥurūf al-muqaṭṭa’a*]. [t]

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What is the meaning of *Tafwīd*?

Ibn al-‘Arabī mentioned that there are fifteen meanings for the word *istiwā* [lit. rising]—some of which are literal and some of which are figurative. And Ibn Ḥajar mentioned that there are twenty five meanings for the word *yad* [lit. hand]—some of which are literal and some of which are figurative. And the same may be said for the other attributes as well. Now the meaning of each expression differs: (one) according to that which is ascribed to it, and (two) its greater context.

What about the person who engages in figurative interpretation (*Ta’wīl*)?

Simply put: he specifies a particular meaning among these many meanings; and usually this specification is due to a speculative proof [*dalīl ḡannī*], although sometimes it is due to an unequivocal proof [*dalīl qat’ī*]. An example of the latter is interpreting “withness” [*ma’īyya*] as “withness” of the attributes only, and interpreting “in” [*fī*]—which is an adverb—as “on/upon” [*‘alā*], and so on.

With regards to speculative interpretation, it must have a proof in the language and in the Sacred Law, or else it will be considered interpolation [*taḥrīf*]—and this is the basis for those verifying scholars who objected to interpreting *istiwā* [rising] as *istilā* [conquering]! So if it is based on a speculative proof, he [the person who engages in figurative interpretation] will acknowledge it—but this is what the person of non-committal refuses to do, seeking safety from error; and that is what the person who engages in figurative interpretation feels towards the end of his life—such as al-Rāzī, al-Juwaynī, and others.

What about the person who adopts the position of non-committal [*tafwīd*]?

Simply put: he will adopt as his view whatever is based upon an unequivocal proof [*dalīl qat’ī*]—such as the two aforementioned examples—and if something is based upon a speculative proof [*dalīl ḡannī*] he will abstain from specifying a particular meaning from the many different meanings for that one word, while at the same time eschewing any meanings that imply Allah having a likeness to His creation or vice versa.

So according to this brief explanation, the person of non-committal [*tafwīd*] has not parted ways with the linguistic meanings of *yad* or *istiwā*, that it be said that he doesn’t know *ghaḍab* [anger] from *raḥma* [mercy] and *farah* [delight] from ‘*ajab* [amazement]...

There is no third position beyond these two—except the position that some hold in which they posit that the meanings are known although they won’t articulate them! That is because they either specify the meanings of these expressions with meanings taken from the language or they do not. So if they specify then they are interpreting [*ta’wīl*] with either an unequivocal proof or a speculative proof—and if not then they are taking the position of non-committal [*tafwīd*].

What is the meaning we know and the meaning we entrust [to Allah]?

We mentioned earlier that every expression possesses numerous meanings that are known and that one of those meanings is specified by [either] the greater context or by an ascription. We said elsewhere that it is possible for us to know the linguistic meaning of a word before it is placed in a genitive construction. So, for instance, *yad* has twenty five meanings and *istiwā'* has fifteen meanings; however, after a word is given an ascription, one or more of these meanings must be specified—and yet we know for certain that said word [in a context or ascription] can not encompass every meaning given to it in isolation (i.e. when standing alone).

I feel that this might be a bit difficult to understand for non-specialists, but I will clarify it within the framework of explaining the statement of Imām Mālik—assuming that he meant that the meaning of *istiwā'* is known [*ma'lūm*].

Of course the meaning of *istiwā'* is known when it is not ascribed to Allah, the Exalted, or to anyone else. As the scholars of the Arabic language said, it has fifteen meanings; however, after it is ascribed to Allah, the Exalted, one or more of its many meanings must be specified according to the greater context.

Take *nuzūl* [descent] for instance: it has many meanings, such as displacement from a higher place to a lower place, settling down from a higher position to a lower one, indwelling, and declining and other meanings both literal and figurative mentioned in the lexicons. So the person who takes a position of non-committal omits the meanings that are not fitting for Allah, the Exalted, and halts at the remaining meanings: he does not specify and the word *nuzūl* stays as *nuzūl* and that's it. Now the brothers here took it upon themselves to specify one or more of these meanings but at the end of the day they were unable to do so.

Summary:

The meaning known to us is the meaning that is isolated from an ascription (or it is the meaning of a word before given an ascription)—regarding this, we say that it is “known” [*ma'lūm*]. As for the meaning which is left [to Allah], it is the meaning of the expression after it is ascribed to Him, the Exalted, and then it will just be an attribute. Why is this? It is because the specification of one meaning out of many for one word depends on knowing the modality—and there is no way to know that...

